

Engraved Gems
King Collection CaT
Notes on
by VORS



A FEW NOTES

ON THE

Collection of Antique Gems

OF THE

REV. C. W. KING,

OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE (ENGLAND),

On Exhibition with the Peuardent Collection,

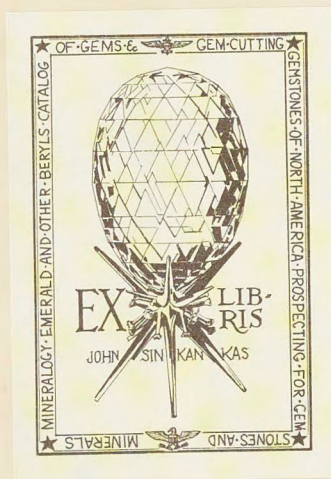
AT

No. 30 LAFAYETTE PLACE, NEW YORK.

[by Frédéric VORS]

New York:

1879



A FEW NOTES
ON THE
Collection of Antique Gems
OF THE
REV. C. W. KING,
OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE (ENGLAND).

Messrs. Feuardent & Company have just put on exhibition the valuable "King collection." The name alone of Mr. C. W. King stamps it with a character of importance and truth which nothing else could give it, for he is the great connoisseur of Europe in these matters. His works on Antique Gems, Early Christian Numismatics, The Gnostics and their Remains, his handbook of Engraved Gems, his Natural History of Precious Stones and Metals, his classification of the gems in the "Cesnola Collection," and many others of his writings, are widely spread and form a no unimportant item in archeological matters. This collection, which embraces some three hundred and fifty pieces, all but three of which have metal mountings, in most cases of gold, took him forty years to make, may be considered as the key-stone and summing up of his great knowledge, and as he remarks himself, quoting from Goethe, cost him "many a heavy fee for his apprenticeship," and it is only now that he has nearly lost his sight and can no longer enjoy it, that he has made up his mind to part with it on the express condition that it was only to be sold in entirety. Mr. Feuardent, who has assisted him in securing important specimens, prevailed on him to let him offer it to American appreciation, well persuaded that the growing taste and culture in archeological matters in this country would enable him to dispose of it readily. A few remarks on the history of the glyptic art furnished from notes given by Mr. King, and from information derived from conversation on the subject with Mr. Feuardent, may serve to illustrate some of the points of this very interesting collection.

THE USE MADE BY THE ANCIENTS of engraved stones was first as a talisman, intended to conciliate the favor of the supernatural power whose image, symbols or attributes decorated its surface; this we find in the Assyrian cylinders, cones, and the Scarabeus which came from Egypt; the secondary use was that of a signet for securing the receptacles for

things of value by means of a seal of clay, affixed to the lid or door which kept off pilferers through the fear of detection, and lastly, as civilization advanced with its manifold requirements, the seal *attested* documents, as does the modern "signature," which in truth derives its name from the older practice. The cut gems of antiquity were therefore small, in general worn as finger rings, and this explains why, in this valuable aggregate of them, so few large pieces are to be found. Another plea for exiguity of size is the expensive nature of the stones employed and the amount of labor, both manual and artistic, necessary to invest the object with its inherent perfection; both augmenting the intrinsic value of them, even in those ancient times, and consequently made them very scarce. Imitations called "*Pâtes de verre*," reproducing mechanically, both the color of the stone and the work on it were extensively made for those who could not afford originals and have often led to curious mistakes among collectors.

THE STONES USED BY THE ANCIENTS to engrave upon may be enumerated in the order in which they successively came into use.

The Assyrians took for their first essays the best substance for the purpose that they found close at hand; this was the black and the dark green serpentine, a combination of magnesia with silice colored by the oxides of iron or chrome; black Hematite from the Chaldean hills, replaces serpentine in most of the Babylonian work; this substance was discarded in later ages on account of its unartistic appearance, though its magnetic virtue recommended it to the gnostics as a supernatural virtue. The conical seals are in most cases of Chalcedony, sometimes white. The true art of seal engraving only came to Egypt much later, but their scarabæi were made of a slatey stone, easily cut, but infusible, and therefore fit for receiving the blue enamel that covered them. The earliest Greek specimens were cut on small lenticular pebbles found on the sea coast, but they soon advanced to the use of the calcedony and sard, which is of the same nature, but more transparent and of a yellowish red color. The Romans preferred blood-red. The shade of a uniform brown is distinguished by the French name of *Sardonine*.

While Chalcedony was at the best Roman period quite out of fashion, a fact well shown by the inferior work of this period found on stone of that color. The common European Cornelian is but an opaque and dull colored sard; it was, however, extensively used by the Etruscans for their scarabæi, when unable to obtain the oriental kind.

The French call both these sorts *Cornalines*; Chalcedony colored green by nickel becomes the celebrated "*Jaspes*" of the Greeks and Romans, for the opaque stone, now called "*Jasper*," bears various applications in antiquity derived from its different colors. The ancient "*Jaspes*" is the *Plasma* of collectors, it is also called "*Root of Emerald*." It was generally used by the Romans for inferior work in the shape of signet rings, though Mr. King states that the Boy Dicobolus (No. 236 of the collection) is the finest piece of work, and the specimen of the finest quality of this stone.

The *Corallis* of Pliny came into fashion for signets before the reign of Hadrian. The dark green Pliny calls *Malochites* from its resemblance in color to the Mallou leaf was in great repute for amulets. There is a rarer kind, bright yellow, which was exclusively devoted to Egyptian amulets.

The *Amethyst* or Rock-crystal, tinged more or less purple by oxide of iron, was used by all nations at all periods, though Pliny led us to believe that the name *Amethystus* embraced some shades of garnet. The regularly stratified agate named *Sardonix* was also much used. When made up of two layers only, the upper one pale blue, the lower, black, translucent or opaque, it goes by the name of "*Nicolo*."

The Greeks, who used the *Sardonyx* exclusively for intaglio work, cut it across the strata, thereby producing the "*Tricolored*" or "*Banded Agate*."

The Romans used the *Sardonyx* for cameos principally, cutting it in horizontal layers, and using them to produce a contrast of color. The Oriental Garnet comes next in order, and was called *Pyrop* when red in tint, *Almandine* when bluish, *Guarnaccino* if brown and *Hyacinth* or *Cinnamon Stone* when of bronze or light yellow. There remains another material employed by the engravers of every period that, is "*Lapis Lazuli*," the "*Sapphirus*" and "*Cyanus*" of the ancients. Under this last name they also designated the Turquoise. Of the true precious stones of the present day, Diamond, Ruby, Sapphire and Emerald, none were used by the ancients except in some very exceptional cases, in which the Sapphire was employed, as for the signets of Polycrates, Alexander and of Ptolemy Lathyrus (No. 104). In this collection is a very good example of one of these scarce specimens.

THE MANNER OF CUTTING OF THE ANCIENTS differs essentially from that now used, the invention of the lapidary's art is ascribed by the prophet Enoch to the angel Azazyel, chief of the angels who took to themselves wives from among the daughters of men. The most ancient method consisted in scraping down the surface with a sharp fragment of hard stone, and effect the drilling and polishing by means of silicious sand rubbed in with a wooden point. The work of the Greek artists, that defies all modern competition, was probably produced by substituting emery stone (*Naxium*) and copper for flint and wood. The ancients also used what they called *adamas*, which signifies *corandum*, and Pliny informs us how it was applied in the form of a splinter fixed in an iron style. With this adamant and emery powder applied with the drill did the Greeks and the Etruscans turn out their most finished works. The modern craftsman acts upon the same principles, the only modification is that of changing the drills for small wheels set in motion by a lathe and charged with emery or diamond powder mixed with oil. The ancient method required more artistic knowledge and produces greater freedom of touch than the mechanical operation of the wheel. The Italian artists early in the last century of the school of Flavio Sciletti introduced the diamond point into their practice, and thus attained such results that many of the "fine Greek works" now adorning national and private cabinets, are in reality due to their ingenuity and taste.

THE SUBJECTS TREATED were generally religious and supernatural, and the earliest specimens are representative of the Kabalistic and Gnostic amulets. The illustrations of history and mythology, particularly of those legends whence the poets drew their themes and contemporary portraits or memorable events in patrician life seem to have furnished the matter for the greatest part of the designs—to them may be added a few pieces of great rarity;

the memorials of primitive christianity (see No. 61). In the catalogue of this collection the stones are classified by subjects, and as every engraved gem has a history of its own, which it is interesting, if possible, to trace, Mr. King has carefully noted in his catalogue the sources from which each was obtained. They came in most cases from the collections of Messrs. Praum, Hertz, Dr. Mott, Giovanni di Demetrio (the two last through Mr. Feuardent), the Uzielli cabinet, the Eastwood, Arosarena, Pulski, Böock, Lady Greaves and Feuardent collections.

Those who take an interest in antique jewelry will find in this collection some remarkable specimens of the signet rings worn by the ancients; some are set in very fantastic patterns of less ancient date, and all other mountings have been faithfully copied from antique originals under Mr. King's special supervision.

The following extract from the catalogue will give some idea of the interest and importance of this collection.

- 1 An Assyrian Cylinder—The MAN-HEADED BULL erect—plunging a short dagger into the belly of a lion. Next stands a man, crowned, holding a bull and the Babylonian Hercules *Sandon* killing a second lion.
- 3 *Persian* cone anterior to the Macedonian conquest, bearing the figure of Hermes, but treated after the Persian taste.
- 30 *Indian*—Bust of a man, cut in a fine sard.
- 52 Is a gnostic figure, the Mother of Creation, a bi-sexual figure in a translucent stone of the nature of the chrysoprase.
- 61 Is a very scarce specimen of a Christian character representing a female martyr with the monogram of Christ, cut in red jasper.
- 69 A bust of Juno, crested with the peacock, and wearing a necklace and earrings. The strongly marked profile leaves no doubt of its being Julia Titi thus deified, a beautiful amber sard with a curious red spot on the cheek of the figure.
- 74 Is a fine Italio-Greek intaglio, representing Titan, on a large sard, completely blanched by fire—(found at Cumae).
- 75 *Jupiter Ammon*, a vigorous production of the Cyrenaic school (about 400 B. C.) in the original gold setting—the stone is a fine sard.
- 84 Shows us a Nereus and Doris moving lovingly together over the waves. The peculiar treatment of the water and the exquisite finish of the engraving make this a gem of the highest merit.
- 88 *Amymone* kneeling. A remarkable example of early Greek art in a very light brown sard.
- 99 Head of Pallas. An admirable example of the style of Rega of Naples, cut in aquamarine (from Lady Greave's collection).
- 100 *bis* A Minerva as *Dea Roma*, seated upon a pile of Armor, in fine Lapis laqui.
- 102 A magnificent head of Medusa, in three-quarter face, of the best Roman period, but still more valuable from the rarity of the stone, a great periodot (topazius.)

- 113 Greek head of Proserpine of the best period, very deeply cut in a rich brown sard.
- 115 Apollo Delphicus a masterpiece of the later Greek school, cut in a sard of rich deep color.
- 143 *Diana Ephesia*, standing between the busts of Sol and Luna, cut in a dark sard.
- 162 Represents a helmet. This stone appears never to have received the finishing touches.
- 164 A Fight between two Romans on foot and two on horseback. Excellent work of the Consular period. Brown sard.
- 79 Psyche on one knee opening the "Box of Beauty," which she was to have carried to Venus. This was the best of the Poniatowski gems known to me for excellence of design and fineness of execution; the stone is an amethyst of great size and beautiful color.
- 181 Bacchus cut in Sardoine, of many layers cut transversely, the lower part being broken; the material gives the appearance of long grass and flowers in the impression.
- 183 A Silenus, half length reclining, in the best Greek style, in a light brown sard.
- 187 Young Faun's Bust, in the highest Greek art, on a circular pale sard.
- 216 Omphale walking, clad in the spoils of Hercules and carrying his club. Good work of the early Cinque Cinto in a large sard.
- 218 Hercules about to let fly an arrow at the Stymphalian Birds. On a beautiful golden sard.
- 223 Hercules lifting Antæus in a deadly hug and at the same time kicking down Mother Earth, who vainly comes to the service of her son.
- 227 Represents the head of Africa, personified, in front face, and may be considered as one of the finest pieces in existence. The head is covered with the hide of an elephant treated in the same manner as on the coins of Alexander Ægus.
The sard, of large size, on which it is cut, is of curious quality, being full of small black filaments of iron, which perhaps at the time recommended it to the owner from its resemblance to a lion's head and its appropriateness to the subject it bears.
- 230 Shows us a sculptor engaged in modelling a wax head.
- 232 Is a piece of Grecian work of the best class and presents a potter at work.
- 236 Is a "Dicobolus" of Roman style cut in a large plasma of bright colour.
- 239 Ajax Oilei in complete armor bearing away Cassandra from the altar of Pallas—Etruscan art at its best period; banded agate.
- 240 Capaneus struck by Jove's thunderbolt.
- 242 Orthryades, mortally wounded, very early Roman—in cornelian.
- 245 Tydeus, kneeling—Late etruscan work on a sard.
- 247 Ajax bearing off Achilles with an arrow in his foot—early Roman work.

- 250 Is the portrait of a young man, cut in lapis-lazuli.
- 251 Is a Helmeted Alexander, standing beside Bucephalus—Roman work of good style on a large and fine sard.
- 256 A portrait of Brutus the Younger—unusually fine workmanship on a sard of fine color.
- 259 Caius Cæsar, son of Agrippa and Julia.
- 262 A head of young Nero, done in a stiff, flat style, apparently in the Asiatic Greek manner on a very large sard.
- 265 Pertinax, cut on a fine guaruaccino garnet.
- 268 Two busts of Caracalla and Plautilla facing each other—between them is a hymeneal altar, on which the imperial eagle stands.
- 276 Bust of a boy with short curly hair. Cameo in very good work in white upon light brown ground, set in an elegant ring in the Louis XIV taste; with marks upon the shoulders.
- 290 Is a very remarkable specimen of a Lion's head; often called the "Dog Sirius" Graeco-Egyptian school—deeply sunk in a beautiful almandine.
- 301 A little boy standing near a large dog. This is an exquisite engraving of the best Greek times in ruby colored sard. This stone retains traces of the original perforation through the axis, showing that it has been a scarab. The primitive form of the Grecian signet.
- 302 Sphinx, also with perforation, enclosed in a simple Etruscan border.
- 310 Is another Sphinx double bodied, in front face.
- 316 Is a good piece of Roman work of quaint design, presenting an Elephant creeping out of a snail shell.
- 329 A curious Chinese signet in "blue and white" porcelain, with landscape decoration. The characters are incised in red and very clear.

A manuscript and very full catalogue with a long introduction, which is in itself a most valuable and interesting history of the Glyptic Art, in Mr. King's handwriting, accompanies the collection and is included in the price demanded for it.

FRÉDÉRIC VORS,
Expert en objets d'art.

JSL
00071242

